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ABSTRACT

Patterns of low-income student mobility were examined in rural upstate New York, along with impacts on and responses by communities and schools. Analyses of state-level school district data were combined with surveys and interviews with school district administrators. The study focused on 136 persistently poor districts (consistently in the bottom third of upstate districts in school district wealth each year from 1991 to 1999) and on 141 economically advantaged districts (consistently in the top third). Results indicate that chronic student mobility, and particularly the mobility of low-income students, posed a serious, but under-documented problem for rural schools. The incidence and effects of student mobility were particularly pronounced in smaller, limited-resource districts. School district administrators reported that high-need, highly mobile students increased administrative costs, and the unpredictability of their movement vastly complicated planning and budgeting processes. In sum, the study suggests a large, high-need segment of the upstate New York population that is largely unrecognized, untargeted, and both socially and academically at risk. Implications for community vitality are discussed, as well as what this might mean in the context of current educational reform measures. (Contains 33 references) (Author/SV)

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# Low Income Student Transiency and its Effects on Schools and School Districts in Upstate New York

by

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**Low Income Student Transiency and its Effects on Schools and School Districts in Upstate New York**

**ABSTRACT** This paper combines analyses of state-level school district data, as well as survey and interview data to examine the patterns of low income student mobility in upstate New York, and to assess the impacts on and responses by communities and community institutions. Chronic student mobility, and in particular the mobility of students from low-income family backgrounds, poses a serious, yet under-documented problem for rural schools. The incidence and effects of student mobility are particularly pronounced in smaller, limited-resource districts. School district administrators report significant negative consequences due to the fiscal and administrative costs associated with high-need, highly mobile students. Student transiency not only requires extra administrative resources from teachers, guidance counselors and other school staff, but the unpredictability of the movement vastly complicates planning and budgeting processes. In sum, the study suggests a large, high-need segment of the upstate New York population that is largely unrecognized, untargeted and both socially and academically at risk. The implications for community vitality are discussed, as well as what this may mean in the context of current educational reform measures.

**Introduction**

Most residential mobility is popularly understood as being both voluntary and largely opportunity-related. That is, people choose to move in order to obtain more desirable or lucrative employment, to improve their quality of life, to enter a better school district, or in some other way take advantage of perceived greater opportunities at migration destinations. Mobility is hence often understood as an investment in one's human capital, and according to this understanding, people tend to move to areas where the highest "return" on their investment may be realized (Lichter and Costanzo 1987). However, the residential movement at the focus of this paper, and one of its consequences – student transiency – is largely unplanned and unpredictable. Instead of yielding greater opportunity, residential mobility associated with student transiency is

both symptomatic of and a causal factor in household insecurity and broader community economic disadvantage.

While there is a growing literature associated with student transiency, this research has tended to focus on transiency within *urban* settings (Alexander et al. 1996; Bruno and Isken 1996; Conniff 1998; Lash and Kirkpatrick 1990;), and/or the relationship between student transiency and academic underachievement (Pribesh and Downey 2002; Rumberger et al. 1999; Swanson and Schneider 1999; Tucker et al. 1998; Wood et al. 1993). This paper, by contrast, focuses primarily on *nonmetro* schools and school districts, and in so doing, emphasizes that chronic mobility of low income students is *not* simply an urban phenomenon. Secondly, instead of exploring the connection between transiency and academic underachievement, this paper is more broadly concerned with the community context within which student transiency occurs. As such, this paper discusses how communities and community institutions are affected by student transiency and the chronic mobility of low income households, as well as what this may imply for school reform and other public policy.

*Student Transiency and its Consequences for Public Education*

While the United States in general is a mobile society, some groups are far more likely to make residential changes than others, including renters and people living below the poverty line. Between March 1999 and March 2000 slightly more than 16 percent of the population changed residence. Yet, during that same time period, nearly 33 percent of renters moved, and nearly 28 percent of people living in households below the poverty

level moved (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). One of the effects of this residential change is student mobility, usually defined as the non-routine and unscheduled transfer of students from one school to another.

While a certain amount of student movement is to be expected in any school system, some students are disproportionately likely to make multiple moves. Similarly, some schools and school districts are disproportionately likely to experience higher rates of student mobility. Research has shown that students most likely to be highly mobile tend to come from low-income families, inner city areas, migrant or limited English proficiency backgrounds, and/or single-parent families (US GAO 1994; Rumberger et al. 1999; Wood et al. 1993). Consequently, the schools most likely to experience high mobility include those in urban and high poverty areas (Bruno and Isken 1996; Capps and Maxwell 2002; OPPAGA 1996). However, chronic residential mobility of limited resource families also affects many rural areas – places that also may have the least available resources, both economic and political, to address the needs of low income movers (Fitchen 1994; 1995).

The academic consequences of student transiency have been debated, but most research points to profoundly negative effects (Hartman 2002). A study by the United States General Accounting Office (1994) using data from a nationally stratified sample of elementary school children in the third grade, found that about 17 percent of third graders had attended three or more schools since kindergarten and therefore could be considered "highly mobile." Forty-one percent of these highly mobile third graders scored below

grade level in reading, and about 31 percent scored below grade level in math. In comparison, only 26 percent of stable students (those who attended only one school since kindergarten) tested below grade level in reading and about 16 percent tested below grade level in math. The study also found that highly mobile third graders were far more likely to repeat a grade than stable students. Ingersoll et al. (1989) in a study of four groups of transient students also found a strong, uniformly negative relationship between student mobility and academic attainment, particularly in the lower grades. Evidence suggests that transiency also affects school completion. Rumberger et al. (1998) found that students who changed high schools even once were less than half as likely as more stable students to complete their high school education.[1]

Research also points to the impacts of student transiency on schools themselves. Student transiency can cause significant disruption to classrooms (Conniff 1998), resulting in slowed curricula and loss of instructional time as a consequence of behavioral problems among new students (Sanderson 2003). Lash and Kirkpatrick (1990), in a study of 21 classes in a single urban elementary school, found that teachers rarely received advance notice of new student arrivals, and in addition to increased administrative and bookkeeping tasks, teachers often needed to re-teach material so that new students could catch up academically. This created classroom management problems as new students learned classroom rules and adapted to new peer groups, but also affected social cohesion

[1] Some research has argued that the connection between mobility and academic underachievement is spurious given that high mobility is so often associated with other risk factors for underachievement. That is, "the predominant reasons students who perform less well in school than students who do not move is that the two groups differ before any moves occur" including the disproportionate likelihood of mobile students to come from poor, single-parent families with low community attachment (Pribesh and Downey 1999: 531). However, other studies have found that residential relocation has negative impacts on academic performance even after socio-demographic factors are controlled for (e.g Wood et al. 1993).

within the classroom. A second grade teacher explained "One of the things we want to establish is that we are a group, and if that group keeps crumbling, it's a little harder (to establish) than in stable schools" (186). This is consistent with the work of Bruno and Isken (1996) who, in a study of transiency within an inner city school, report that teachers repeatedly described how student movement created extra burdens by increasing the administrative workload, and decreasing the regular instructional time. However, more significantly than this was the disruption caused when enrollment change necessitated the reorganization of classrooms (i.e. either merging because of shrinking numbers, or splitting because of growing numbers of students), an event that could be expected to occur anywhere from one and five times at any grade level during any given school year.

In sum, student transiency poses serious challenges for schools and school districts. There are strong correlations between poverty, high levels of mobility and academic underachievement (Wright 1999), and highly mobile students tend to require disproportionate academic intervention and support services. These students also often have serious social needs in addition to academic needs. Chronic mobility negatively affects a student's social ties with peers and teachers, ties important for both emotional and intellectual development (Pribesh and Downey 1999). Evidence strongly suggests that frequent student movement not only may have significantly negative academic and social consequences for mobile students, but may also have negative effects for *non-mobile* students in school settings where levels of student movement are pronounced. Schools themselves face challenges in the areas of classroom administration, as well as in district level planning and budgeting and student transiency may represent significant

strains on the school district staff and on the overall capacity of districts to provide an adequate educational experience to all students. This is particularly the case given that limited resource districts are at higher risk of experiencing pronounced levels of student transiency.

**Examining Student Transiency in Rural Upstate New York**

*"The ones that concern me are the families that just drift from rental to rental. We have 2 or 3 families in particular that I'm thinking of that just seem to bounce from one neighboring district to the next. It's a factor of poverty. They pay rent for a while and then they get evicted and they have to move on and rent somewhere else."* –
Superintendent, Northern Upstate New York

Despite its initial economic expansion, upstate New York[2], a predominantly rural region[3], has experienced significant and sustained decline in the past several decades due in large part to industrial and economic restructuring. This restructuring has eroded the region's manufacturing base, replacing it with lower-wage service sector work (Kuzniak 1999; see also Albrecht et al. 2000). A 1999 study by the Federal Reserve Bank indicated that if the region were considered an independent state, it would rank 48th in the nation in job growth (see e.g. Perillo 1999). As a result, upstate New York has undergone a sustained period of diminished labor force attachment (Hirschl 1999) and dramatically increased levels of income inequality (McNamara and Ranney 1999). Furthermore, this decline has been uneven in nature, with some upstate areas experiencing significantly more economic distress than others (Kuzniak 1999).

[2] By "upstate" I refer to all of New York state except for Long Island, New York City, and Westchester and Rockland Counties, directly north of New York City.
[3] Approximately 90 percent of the districts in this study are classified as non-metro according to census designations.

In order to assess and better understand the effects of chronic residential mobility across this region, a study of student transiency was conducted in the spring of 2002 to determine the differences in incidence and impacts of student transiency across districts differentiated by economic status. District economic status was assessed by the *Combined Wealth Ratio* (CWR), a measure of relative district wealth used to determine annual levels of state aid.[4] The study focused specifically on 136 persistently poor upstate school districts, and 141 wealthier, or economically advantaged districts. Disadvantaged districts were defined as those districts whose CWR values fell into the bottom third quantile for all upstate districts each year between 1991 and 1999.[5] Advantaged districts were defined as those whose Combined Wealth Ratio values fell into the *top* third quantile each year between 1991 and 1999.

It should be noted that few school administrators in upstate New York would truly consider their districts "wealthy," and many of the wealthier districts in fact have substantial pockets of poverty contained within them. Second, income or property value within a district may be inflated somewhat by pronounced local income inequality and/or by large tracts of land owned by the state (particularly in larger, more sparsely populated districts), as is the case in the Adirondack, Catskill and New York Watershed regions. However, the CWR measure is used to assess relative economic status because it is

[4] CWR is calculated as the total local school district income and property wealth divided by the number of local school district students as a ratio of the total income and property wealth in New York state divided by the total number of students in New York state. By definition then the mean CWR is equal to 1. Districts with CWR values of less than 1 have below average wealth and those with values greater than one are wealthier than average. Wealth is concentrated downstate, and therefore the mean CWR value for upstate districts tends to be about .7.

[5] At the time this study was initiated, CWR data were not available after 1999. However, more recent examination of 2002 CWR data show that the relative economic status of upstate districts has remained consistent.

calculated annually (hence providing a consistent measure over time) and can provide a measure of wealth relative across districts. Based on field experience, there tends to be often rather stark differences between these two groups of districts, particularly in terms of the numbers of derelict buildings, the noticeable level of economic activity, the type and quality of the housing stock, and overall level of economic activity.

**Table One. Characteristics of Poor and Wealthier Upstate Districts As Compared to All Other Upstate Districts**

| | DISTRICT TYPE | |
|---|---|---|
| *(MEDIAN VALUES)* | ***Disadvantaged*** | ***Wealthier*** |
| **CWR 2001-02** | .47 | 1.08 |
| **Pct. FRPL Participation**[1] | 43 | 24 |
| **K-6 Enrollments, 2001-02** | 597 | 982 |
| **Population 1990** | 6,167 | 11,427 |
| **Square Miles** | 80 | 77 |
| **N =** | 136 | 141 |

**Source**: NYSED BEDS data

Using data archived by the New York State Education Department, Table One shows some of the basic descriptive characteristics of poor and wealthier upstate districts. In addition to the socioeconomic differences, the set of 136 persistently disadvantaged districts tend to be more typically "rural," with larger land area and smaller populations. However, census-derived designations for these districts show that for both

disadvantaged and wealthier sets of districts at the focus of this study, about 90 percent are classified as non-metro.

**Figure One about here**

As shown in the map in Figure One, there are distinct patterns of wealth and poverty across upstate. The disadvantaged districts form a roughly S-shaped swath extending from the northeastern part of the state across the northern Adirondacks, through the St. Lawrence Valley, into the Mohawk Valley and then back westward across the Southern Tier. The wealthier districts are concentrated to the north of New York City, the Adirondack region, and along the metropolitan fringe of Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo.

One-page mail-back surveys were sent to superintendents of all 277 districts with the request that they either complete the survey or pass it along to the administrator most knowledgeable about student enrollments. Most surveys were completed by superintendents, although other administrators including assistant superintendents, principals, guidance counselors and nurses also completed and returned the surveys. Respondents were asked to report their district's previous year's beginning enrollment, the number of new students admitted to the district over that previous year, and the number of students that transferred out of the district, excluding drop-outs. Enrollment information was only collected for grades 2-12 to avoid inadvertently measuring the effects of private to public transfers during kindergarten and 1st grade (Wardwell 1998). The surveys also gathered basic information on respondent perceptions of the relative socio-economic status of mobile students, the effects of student mobility on the district,

the usual distance of student moves into and out of the district, and the change in locally experienced student transiency over time. The survey also requested permission for follow-up contact.

Eighty-six surveys were returned from the set of disadvantaged districts for a 63 percent response rate. Among the wealthier districts, 76 surveys were returned for a 54 percent response rate.[6] The survey administration was then combined with follow-up phone interviews with administrators in over 50 of the responding districts, 41 of which were completed in disadvantaged districts. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Notes were taken during the interview and were immediately written up after interview completion. These notes were then compiled in NUD*IST, a software program designed to code and analyze text-based qualitative data. The quotes used in this report, unless otherwise noted, are taken from notes written during and immediately after these interviews. Site visits and additional interviews were subsequently completed in 10 of these study districts.

For this study, student mobility is examined through inter-district student movement. Because of this, it should be noted that these data in fact *underestimate* actual student mobility because they neither account for student residential moves that do not involve a school change, nor moves in which a student changes schools, but does not exit the district. About 16 percent of the school age population moves in a given year (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). However, most residential moves do *not* involve a change of

[6] School district characteristics including size and relative wealth were compared between groups of respondents and non-respondents. No evidence of response bias was detected.

school, much less a change of school district. Swanson and Schneider using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study found that only about 36 percent of residential moves were accompanied by a school change for students in grades 8-10, and for students in grades 10-12 less than one quarter of residential moves were accompanied by a change of school. A 1993 study found that students are about equally likely to make unscheduled school changes within a district as across districts (US GAO 1994).[7] Nonetheless, these data do provide a *comparative* assessment of student mobility across these upstate districts responding to the survey.

*Incidence of Student Transiency in Poorer and Wealthier Districts*

For districts responding to the survey, the median transfer rate and admission rate were each about 5 percent for the 2000-2001 academic year[8]. This means that for a district with median transfer and admission rates, about 5 percent of the students enrolled at the beginning of the year would no longer be enrolled in the district by the end of the year and approximately 5 percent of enrolled students at the end of the year had not been enrolled in the beginning of the year. However, reported transiency rates were highly variable with some districts reporting annual admission and transfer rates of over 20 percent, while other districts reported virtually no admissions or transfers at all.[9] Admission rates were also strongly correlated with transfer rates,[10] and therefore even

[7] Other research has suggested that moves within district boundaries may be at least twice as common as moves into or out of a district (Fitchen 1994).
[8] Admission rates and transfer rates were calculated by dividing the beginning of year enrollment by the number of admissions and the number of transfers in that academic year, and then multiplying by 100.
[9] Especially for smaller districts with less available resources, even low levels of turnover can have dramatic effects. The admission of several unanticipated high need, high cost students can put severe strains on a district's budget and overall resources.
[10] The correlation coefficient was .88.

districts with high levels of student transiency tended to have only negligible net changes in enrollments from one year to the next.

**Table Two. Incidence and Consequences of Student Turnover: Disadvantaged and Wealthier Districts Compared**

| | *District Economic Status* | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Disadvantaged[1]** | **Wealthier[2]** |
| Avg. admission rate | 7.2 | 4.5 |
| Avg. transfer rate | 7.8 | 4.3 |
| Pct. Respondents stating turnover causes "significant" challenges for the district | 19.0 | 10.3 |
| Pct. Respondents stating that newly admitted students generally are of lower economic status than of already enrolled students in the district | 46.4 | 28.2 |

[1] N = 86
[2] N = 76

One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the data is that student turnover disproportionately affects poorer districts. As the data in Table Two show, the level of turnover in the disadvantaged districts is nearly twice that of wealthier upstate districts.[11] Additionally, disadvantaged districts were almost twice as likely to state that student turnover caused "significant" challenges, and almost half of the respondents from these districts stated that most newly enrolled students were likely to be of lower economic

[11] It is difficult to compare these figures with other studies of student transiency because typically the units of analysis used are either students, or schools, not school districts. A 1993 study found that students are about equally likely to make unscheduled school changes within a district as across districts (US GAO 1994). However, Bruno and Isken (1996) reported average transiency rates (the number of students entering and leaving the district as a percentage of the total enrollment) in the Los Angeles Unified School District of 42.6 percent, and 23 percent in the Austin public school system. Alexander et al. found over a 5 year period that transiency rates in Baltimore city schools averaged between 14 and 21 percent.

status than already enrolled students. This compares to only 28 percent of respondents from wealthier districts.

Regardless of district economic status, however, in interviews survey respondents from both poorer and wealthier districts consistently described the movement of low income students as being characterized by both high frequency and short distance. Of the respondents who provided estimates of the usual distance of inter-district student movement, 71 percent believed it was less than 30 miles.[12] Respondents frequently used terms like "ping-ponging," "bouncing," and "shuffling" in reference to what they saw as overwhelming back and forth short distance moves across school district and county lines.

While low income movers themselves were not interviewed as part of this study, the comments of survey respondents are consistent with the findings of previous research regarding the limited distance of residential movement associated with household economic insecurity. Transient households are not detached from place, despite the frequency of residential relocation. While economic and social disruptions may spur residential movement, the resources of local social and informational networks, the desire not to leave an area, and the attachments to family and friends often restrict geographic

[12] In a subsequent case study of a disadvantaged district with an annual student turnover rate of over 30 percent, GIS analysis of origin and destination districts relative to the case study district revealed that the median distance of moves within upstate was only 11 miles, i.e. almost entirely to neighboring and adjoining districts.

range. This is coupled by the greater financial cost, logistical complexity and overall greater uncertainty associated with longer distance moves (see e.g. Fitchen 1994).[13]

**Causal Factors Associated With Chronic Student Mobility**

*"Mostly students are moving within the area. For example a family just moved into the district from (a nearby district). They weren't able to pay the rent where they lived and so they moved on into this district. We see that a lot. And then the same thing will happen. They'll move back out to another district again. They move into trailers. There are also old farm houses. The farm is no longer a farm and so in desperation the family will rent the house. Often these houses are in very bad repair, and owned by absentee landlords."* – Superintendent, Western New York

Just as disadvantaged districts were most likely to experience the highest rates of student turnover, nearly all interviewed respondents indicated that low socioeconomic status was a major risk factor for high mobility. Administrators consistently reported a core group of disproportionately disadvantaged movers undergoing coerced moves due to a variety of economic and social crises. Comments like the following were repeated over and over again in the course of interviews:

> "I've been here over 30 years in northern New York and in this 5-district area. There is a constant amount of mobility especially in low SES families. A lot of this is because of broken families. It's not uncommon for a student to be here for 1/3 of the year. Low SES families tend to bounce around quite a bit." - Director of Instruction, Northern Upstate
>
> "There is a connection between economic status and mobility. The lower SES kids tend to move more. They will bounce a lot, sometimes 3-4 times in a school year." - Principal, Mohawk Valley
>
> "(The most frequent movers are) low SES, I don't mean to characterize, but a lot of them are IEP.[14] A lot of times I'll get a Special Ed kid with a lot of needs and the school board will tell me, 'don't worry about it -- in a

[13] Evidence suggests that similar factors also limit the geographic range of mobility in urban areas as well (Alexander et al. 1996).
[14] Individualized Education Plans are specially designed instruction plans for students with learning disabilities.

> couple of weeks they'll be gone' and sure enough 6 weeks later they've gone to another district." – Superintendent, Mohawk Valley
>
> "If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that it's probably like 75 percent of the students who are mobile are in poverty – and we make that identification based on FRPL[15] participation." – Superintendent, St. Lawrence Valley
>
> "What I'm seeing is we get a lot of young poor families that move into the inexpensive housing in the district." – Superintendent, Southern Tier

Connected to poverty-related family stress and family crises, district administrators consistently identified housing-related issues as a strong factor in mobility. While low cost housing may in some cases initially attract poor families to an area (e.g. Fitchen 1995), it may also perpetuate a more localized chronic mobility, especially if the housing stock is of marginal quality. One administrator said, "It seems like they're moving from district to district because of housing…You should see some of the places they're moving into. A lot of times the housing is in such disrepair! They get into conflicts with landlords because of this and they'll move on because the housing is so bad." Another, noting what seemed to be a seasonal increase in mobility during the winter months, said "I know of one family that just moved because the water pipes kept freezing and the landlord wouldn't do anything about it." By contrast, among disadvantaged rural districts with markedly low student turnover, a common characteristic was the relative lack of available housing, particularly among smaller, more isolated districts.

**Table Three about here**

[15] Free and Reduced Price Lunch.

The data in Table Three show the multiple factors identified by interviewed respondents as contributing to the increased mobility of low income families in their district.[16] In interviews, respondents were encouraged to identify as many causal factors as they felt relevant. The table separates causal factors into local migration "pulls" and "pushes," subdividing by school district student turnover level the number of respondents who mentioned each causal factor.[17] It then further lists causal factors identified as generally related to increased mobility without necessarily functioning as either a migration "push" or "pull."

The biggest difference between groups is that the availability of low-cost housing was more frequently identified as a migrant draw by administrators in the high turnover districts than in the low turnover districts. Additionally, among districts with the highest turnover, poverty and impoverishment were more frequently mentioned as causal factors in chronic student mobility. Regardless of the distinction between districts, the relationship between mobility and economic insecurity at both the household and the community level clearly emerges. While Table Three is broken into discrete causal factors, most respondents emphasized the deep interrelationships of these factors. For example, many respondents noted the following causal chain – economic decline leads to generally increased family economic insecurity. This increased insecurity increases

[16] This particular table only summarizes interview data from respondents in the disadvantaged districts. In written comments from administrators within the wealthier districts, similar factors were identified with higher levels of mobility, as well as the consequences of high mobility for the school district in terms of difficulties in planning, budgeting and meeting the needs of students.

[17] Relative turnover levels were calculated by adding the admission and the turnover rates and then calculating three quantiles. Districts with combined admission and turnover rates of less that 9.7 were characterized as having "low" turnover (N=25), those with combined rates between 9.7 and 17.6, "medium" (N=26) and those greater than 17.6, "high" (N=26). Not all districts provided complete enrollment information on the returned surveys.



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crises within families including heightened abuse, separation and divorce. This in turn leads to custody issues and children moving without parents. As one superintendent from western New York put it, "Economic stress creates unstable family situations. We see mothers who get together with a boyfriend and that boyfriend doesn't want to move, so she moves and takes the kids and then that doesn't work out so they move back again and then meet someone else and move in with that person and so on. We see a lot of that."

*Housing Stock and Mobility of Resource Limited Households*

In Table Three housing issues top both push and pull lists as causal factors for residential mobility of low income families. A clear connection emerged from the interview data between the gradual impoverishment of households and communities, and changes in housing stock leading to increased residential mobility. Many communities in upstate New York have seen a gradual shrinking of populations as local economies and job markets tighten. This has gradually led to changes in housing markets and housing stock. As residents leave the area housing prices drop, and dwellings are converted into rental properties, often managed by absentee landlords. Under these circumstances the quality of housing stock may noticeably deteriorate which also leads to increased mobility as households move to escape unacceptable or dangerous living conditions.

In many upstate communities lead abatement has posed a particular issue in the last number of years as code inspections have become more rigorous. A social service agency staff person related, "I had one family recently who moved from the apartment where I met them in July and they moved into another house. Section 8 came to do the

inspection and they found the house was full of lead and so they had to move again. So that was three moves and they had just moved into the first apartment, so she had had three moves in three months. This was all in this same community. She moved from (the next community over) to here and then there were two more moves within this community."

Regardless of the housing quality however, many residents struggle with simple affordability. In much of upstate New York, the employment available to most people with only a high school diploma is predominantly low paid service sector work. Much of the work available to unskilled workers without education beyond a high school diploma pays the minimum wage or only slightly above, thrusting households into conditions of chronic economic vulnerability. A staff worker in a county-level housing advocacy organization emphasized how little financial cushion many people have and the effects on the ability to secure adequate housing.

> "I think what happens is the affordability. Look at the cost of rental units and the income. Calculate the budget of a single mom working at minimum wage and check the cost of the housing. And if you look at that closely it's not hard to figure out that this person is headed for financial disaster unless something happens. It's impossible to make those numbers work. The wages available and the housing costs are not compatible. You end up compromising at this point. There are people who are making choices between buying food and buying medicine. Those are hard choices. There are no other resources to offset (this situation) that they are aware of, so we see a lot of those folks in crisis because of expenses that have become uncontrollable. You have a single mother in particular, and we work with a lot of those, ranging from 14 on up. It's very difficult if a car breaks for example. $200 is a paycheck. That's a hole right there and ultimately unless something happens to offset that somewhere, that person's going to be in trouble. They have to make some hard choices. And generally it'll come down to rent. I see people behind in rent because they've had to pay a utility bill."

This is consistent with the most recent annual report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) which compares wages and rents for all states, counties and MSAs in the United States. The report uses data on rental costs to calculate a Housing Wage, which is equivalent to the amount that someone working full time (40 hours per week) must earn per hour to be able to afford a two-bedroom unit at Fair Market rent.[18] The report argues that the minimum wage, which has remained $5.15 per hour since 1997[19], is unable to provide a Housing Wage in any jurisdiction. In fact, 75 percent of states (containing 90 percent of the U.S. renting population) have a Housing Wage over twice the minimum wage. Of all states, New York is the 5th least affordable state with a Housing Wage of $18.24 for a 2 bedroom home at Fair Market rent, amounting to 354 percent of the minimum wage.

**The Fiscal and Administrative Consequences of Student Transiency for Districts**

*"Most of the community does not recognize this as an issue. But it creates a huge problem. There is no general awareness but right now there is no excess. The aid is frozen by the state. To pay for the needs of these kids we will have to go to the local taxpayer. It's a hard sell to the community at large that we have this unknown group that requires some substantial resources that don't even exist to most people here but nonetheless are very real to us."* - Superintendent, Southern Tier

Student transiency can have tremendous fiscal and administrative impacts on school districts as they attempt to meet the needs of pupils disproportionately in need of special education and remedial services. Consistent with previous research findings on student

[18] The Housing Wage is defined as a wage 30 percent of which is equivalent to the cost of Fair Market rent, on the assumption that affordable housing costs consume no more than 30 percent of household income. Fair Market rent is equivalent to the 40th percentile of rental costs for the given area, on the assumption that this represents a safe and adequate quality of housing (NLIHC 2002).

[19] The current value of minimum wage in constant dollars is worth about 70 percent of what it was worth in 1968 (NLIHC 2002).

transiency (see e.g. US GAO 1994, and Rumberger et al. 1999), administrators spoke at length about how highly mobile students not only tended to be low SES, but also entered the district with high social and educational needs. Academic and behavioral problems were frequently associated with or identified as a consequence of high mobility. "(Low SES) students are highly mobile," related one administrator.

> "These students have academic difficulties. This is caused because of the disruption, both academic and social caused by switching schools and residence. These kids have more difficulties making friends and socially integrating into the school. They also tend to have more behavioral problems."

District budgets are prepared for each successive year based on the enrollments and need of the previous year's student body. Yet, residential mobility of high needs students may place school districts in planning situations of extreme uncertainty. This is particularly true of smaller districts that have less fiscal resources at their disposal in which even small enrollment changes can have significant fiscal and administrative consequences. This creates particular vulnerability for many disadvantaged rural districts, even under circumstances in which actual student turnover may be low. A superintendent from a small, rural district with an enrollment of between 600 and 700 students, stated,

> "There is increased pressure on school budgets. One sixth of our budget is targeted towards special needs kids. This year, we had budgeted $100 thousand for expenses associated with kids we anticipated would move into the district. We figured that we could expect 4 special needs kids to move into the district. We had 10 actually move in and we ended up needing to spend $250 thousand to meet their needs, so we went $150 thousand over our budget. We are a small district, and so this was significant."

These kinds of budget over-runs eventually are reflected in local tax levies. However, because of the lower overall wealth of disadvantaged districts, fiscal burdens of this type are not easily absorbed.

A disturbing consequence is that for the poorest districts where the transiency of high-need and high-cost students is likely to be the most pronounced, these students quickly begin to represent a liability to financially strapped school districts. In response to whether the district had any programming in place to stabilize transient students, one of the interviewed administrators reacted "why would we have those programs in place? We don't want those students to stay in our district!" The majority of administrators I spoke with were not that blunt. However, others acknowledged that the placement of students into special programming was often delayed because of the costs that would be incurred with that placement, coupled with the real chance that the student would soon move out of the district.

**"No Child Left Behind," Testing Assessments and the Rationalization of Education**

*"A big challenge is simply nutrition. These kids can't make it if they're not eating properly...For these kids teaching is probably not our highest priority -- and that may sound funny coming from a superintendent. Rather the highest priority for these kids tends to be their social needs. Of course we get killed by the state if our test scores aren't high enough – that's how our performance is assessed. But no one ever recognizes the kind of work we do with these kids. No one is really thanking us for it or recognizing it."*
-- Superintendent, Northern Upstate NY

Transient students represent liabilities to school districts in other regards as well. Of particular concern is that school districts with the least resources disproportionately experience high mobility of academically and socially disadvantaged students. This has disturbing implications for the increased emphasis on school accountability through

testing. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act requires states to use testing as a means of holding local school systems accountable for the academic preparation provided to students, based on the assumption that student test scores from a given school reflect the academic preparation that school has been able to provide. Student transiency obviously complicates this assumption however, and in high mobility schools and districts, schools may be held "accountable" for underachieving and at risk students who have disrupted academic experiences and may have only been in the local school system for comparatively short periods of time. As a superintendent from north central New York exclaimed, "we're supposed to provide students with support to get through the regents exams, but they're not even our kids! They're coming in and they're going out and we're supposed to prepare them!"

Regarding testing assessments, several respondents spoke about how these changes had affected both the social and work environments within schools. A counselor in one of the districts I visited told me,

> "I know that we have to do more, but I'm not sure that standards have been raised. There is a lot more accountability in terms of testing. That's a huge change. It used to be a lot more fun. There's kind of a grimness you kind of have to approach this…you've got 100 things in the air, and how are we going to keep them in the air? There used to be a lot more humor and fun. Working with students was a lot more friendlier. But now we've curriculum-driven. Every teacher is under pressure to produce so much, and they know that. We talk about this in staff meetings. It seems there was a kinder, gentler school 25 years ago. For a variety of reasons we're not kinder and gentler. Schools are run in a much more businesslike way with the bottom line in mind."

Transient students clearly challenge that bottom line, and the consequences for not meeting standards are significant, including potential staff turnover and the subsidization

of students leaving to attend other, "non-failing," schools. Again, as schools are held to testing standards, those districts with the highest levels of mobility are at a distinct disadvantage because of the over-representation of low achieving students among those students most likely to be mobile. In New York currently about 1 in 8 schools statewide *fail to meet testing accountability standards (Gormley 2002), representing an immediate* and pressing concern for many district administrators.

Parra and Pfeffer (2002) argue that the school system is one of the few local institutions capable of really helping to integrate new low income residents into the community. However, while having the stated intention of raising academic standards, *No Child Left Behind* may in some circumstances have the effect of *undermining* the socially integrative capacities of school districts and reinforcing the academic and social exclusion of already marginalized children.

**Conclusions**

This paper has argued that student transiency and the chronic residential mobility of resource limited households is both symptomatic of community and household economic disadvantage as well as a phenomenon that, in part, reproduces that disadvantage. The impacts of student transiency on school districts are serious. In economic decline, many districts in the upstate region have seen gradual enrollment decreases along with shrinking tax bases, leaving districts with dwindling resources. Those districts that face especially high or unpredictable levels of student turnover are placed in circumstances in which they are likely to experience unpredicted budget overruns because of the high

percentage of high need students among the most mobile populations. In these circumstances, despite the mandates of schools to provide services to all eligible members of the population, these high need, highly mobile students – through no fault of their own – increasingly are viewed as liabilities by school districts. All children have the right to receive an adequate and appropriate education. However, it is clear that the academic and social needs of highly transient students are going unmet and that schools and school districts have only limited capacity to address this challenge.

While student transiency has most frequently been studied within urban contexts, clearly it is a challenge posed not only to urban school systems. In fact, smaller rural school systems may be disproportionately *less* able to address the needs of disadvantaged, mobile students due to more limited fiscal, administrative and institutional resources at their disposal. However, more work remains to be completed in order to better understand how the incidence, dynamics and effects of student transiency may vary across the urban-rural continuum. While housing and economic insecurity appear to play important roles in exacerbating chronic mobility regardless of district location, how might job and housing markets in urban and rural areas differentially affect the incidence, type and geographic range of mobility experienced by school districts? How might mobile student populations differ across urban and rural areas, and how do their academic and social needs differ? These are all questions that remain to be explored.

Additionally, while this particular study is focused on upstate New York, the factors associated with student transiency, including job and housing market change, community

and household economic insecurity, housing insecurity and family crisis, are by no means unique to rural areas only in New York. Rather, this paper argues that student transiency is a product of poverty and insecurity, which in the United States is concentrated in both inner city and in rural areas. If rural poverty is characterized in part by its relative "invisibility" in comparison to urban poverty, student transiency and chronically mobile students in rural school systems arguably share in that invisibility.

While national education policy is currently framed by the premise of "leaving no child behind," evidence suggests that transient students *are* being left behind, and currently few school districts have programming in place to specifically address the needs of transient students. As a guidance counselor working within a high transiency district remarked about his district's revolving door of students,

> "No one owns these kids. They have no political or economic power. The chances of reform happening (for them) are certainly less than they might be for other groups. No one speaks on behalf of these kids and they are less likely to advocate on behalf of themselves."

This is a compelling reason for further documentation of student transiency, and particularly in rural areas. In the short term, research leading to the institutional recognition of transient students as an identified and targetable student population would increase the chances of forming appropriate programming. The "No Child Left Behind" Act reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act entitling homeless children to free and appropriate public education and furthermore allocates Title I funds to that end. Yet, most transient students are not technically homeless by the criteria of

the McKinney-Vento Act.[20] Rather, what was described by district administrators was a chronic housing insecurity that may or may not result in short term periods of what might be more strictly defined as homelessness. Similarly, students qualifying as migrants are also targeted populations with a variety of state and local level resources available to school districts. However, nearly all district administrators contacted in this study made clear distinctions between migrant students and local residentially mobile poor populations.[21]

The issues surrounding residential mobility of low income families are not simply issues for schools and school districts, but rather are embedded within community contexts and within macro processes of structural change. Better understandings of these contexts and processes could lead to innovative local measures taken by schools and school districts, including student "newcomer" programs, outreach to parents and families, and staff development focused on the needs of mobile students (Paik and Phillips 2002). Given that most mobility associated with student transiency is highly localized, this yields potentially important opportunities for inter-district collaboration, at the very least in the area of streamlined student record-sharing to facilitate student placement and programming consistency. However, collaborative activity could also extend to inter-district youth risk prevention programming and the development of deeper networks between schools and other local service providing organizations. Similarly, innovative

[20] Legally "homeless" children include those who live in a dwelling that lacks basic services such as electricity or water, who live in temporarily in motels or emergency shelter, parks or public spaces, or who live in temporary arrangements with other families.

[21] Significantly, however, although migrant families are typically thought of in terms of inter-state movement, the relevant migration-defining boundary identifying a "migrant student" is the *school district*. It is unclear the extent to which migrant students remain unidentified by districts because of the localized nature of the student movement.

local measures to stabilize mobile students, provide effective outreach to those students and their families, and address academic and social needs need to be identified and shared so they may be adopted elsewhere as appropriate. However, because districts experiencing the most pronounced levels of student mobility are also those most resource limited, the technical, administrative and fiscal resources available for program development and inter-district collaboration may be insufficient except for the most basic measures.

Any amount of school reform, no matter how sweeping, will not change the basic facts of the economic conditions experienced by so many families in upstate New York and elsewhere in the United States. While chronic residential mobility is a problem for families and communities, the real problem is economic insecurity that has been made significantly worse by increased income inequality, labor market transformation and the removal of government-provided social supports. High wage manufacturing jobs, once common, have been replaced by low wage service sector jobs, many paying minimum wage or slightly higher. At the same time, recent political decision-making has resulted in multi-year, multi-billion dollar tax cuts favoring the wealthiest in New York and across the nation.[22]

This has happened during a recent period of history in which the state's social welfare role has been consistently and dramatically scaled back. Welfare reform's 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) has put a 5 year

[22] In 1995 the wealthiest 1 percent of New Yorkers received 24 percent of state income tax cuts, reducing taxes paid in the state by $4 billion (Parrott et al. 1999).

cap on aid disbursement, requiring participation in work or work related activities. And yet, minimum wage work virtually guarantees poverty and insecurity. While the impact has been significant in term of the number of people moving off welfare, research has indicated that these changes have significantly increased housing insecurity for many households (HAC 2002). "Personal responsibility" does not ensure escape from insecurity and the world of the working poor. Regardless of innovative educational reform, without employment opportunities offering a livable wage, and housing that is both affordable and livable, the social insecurity at the root of chronic residential mobility will unquestionably remain.

**Table Three. Local "Push and "Pull" Factors Leading to Increased Mobility Among Low Income Movers in Districts with Low, Medium and High Rates of Student Turnover**

| | *District Enrollment Turnover Rate* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Low** | **Medium** | **High** | **Total** |
| **LOCAL "PULLS"** | | | | |
| Access to low-cost housing | 2 | 4 | 6 | **12** |
| Availability of social services | 1 | 2 | 3 | **6** |
| Reputation of district | 1 | 0 | 2 | **3** |
| Services provided by district (e.g. Special Education programming) | 0 | 1 | 2 | **3** |
| **LOCAL "PUSHES"** | | | | |
| Eviction; Inability to pay rent and/or bills | 4 | 5 | 2 | **11** |
| Economic decline; Loss of job base | 2 | 3 | 3 | **8** |
| Poor quality of housing stock | 1 | 3 | 0 | **4** |
| Legal authorities/Child Protective Services | 2 | 1 | 0 | **3** |
| Lack of inexpensive housing | 0 | 1 | 0 | **1** |
| Student behavioral issues | 0 | 0 | 1 | **1** |
| Dissatisfaction with district | 1 | 0 | 0 | **1** |
| **OTHER FAMILY AND SES FACTORS** | | | | |
| Poverty and impoverishment | 3 | 6 | 8 | **17** |
| Divorce/separation/family crises | 4 | 5 | 5 | **14** |
| Kinship and other social network ties | 2 | 2 | 2 | **6** |
| Proximity to county lines or county seat | 2 | 2 | 0 | **4** |
| High percent foster child placement | 1 | 1 | 2 | **4** |
| Single parent families | 2 | 1 | 0 | **3** |
| Domestic violence and abuse | 0 | 1 | 1 | **2** |
| Lack of connections to community | 0 | 0 | 1 | **1** |

N=41

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